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SUBJECT: ELECTION IN MADHYA PRADESH: MUMBAI TERROR ATTACKS DIM
CONGRESS' HOPE

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[1](#)1. (U) Summary: Voters went to the polls in Madhya Pradesh (MP) on November 27, just 12 hours after terrorists launched a series of coordinated attacks on Mumbai. Though the Congress Party's internal calculations on the day prior to polls showed that both the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party(BJP) and Congress were evenly pitted in this important state race, by nightfall on election day, the Congress had concluded that the Mumbai attacks would have a serious impact on their electoral chances. Election turnout was high, usually a good sign of strong anti-incumbency, but the talk at polling places centered on the terrorist attacks, bringing home the BJP's campaign message that the Congress Party is ill-equipped to deal with terrorism. Development and women's programs likely also helped BJP. Nevertheless, interlocutors do not discount anti-incumbency sentiment against the BJP, or the impact of third parties, and project that the BJP will be returned with a smaller majority. End Summary.

Terrorist Attacks Change the Equation

[1](#)2. (SBU) On November 27, 12 hours into the terrorist attack on Mumbai, 35 million voters in Madhya Pradesh went to the polls to elect 230 state assembly representatives. The BJP enjoyed a strong majority going into the elections, holding 173 out of 230 seats. By all accounts, the party ran a good campaign under its current Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan. In the run up to the elections, Congress leaders were optimistic that the party could make electoral gains and erode the BJP's lead in the state, but could not achieve a majority on its own. A day before the polls, an optimistic Maharashtra Congress party strategist working on the campaign in MP told Congenoffs that his calculations and constituency level surveys showed that neither party would get a clear majority, but that "friends of the Congress" would help the party form a governing coalition. "Uma Bharti [of the Bharatiya Jan Shakti Party] would help us form the government, one way or another," he exulted, counting on that party to take away votes from the BJP.

[1](#)3. (SBU) In the weeks before the polls, a BJP official in Maharashtra told Congenoffs that the BJP's criticisms of the Congress-led UPA government in New Delhi as being ineffective in tackling terrorism was finding traction in races at the state level. The series of bombings in Bangalore, Ahmedabad and Delhi this year had made the people angry about the UPA's failure to

ensure public safety. Throughout the campaign, the BJP accused the Congress of being unprepared to deal with terrorism; as all India sat glued to their TV sets watching the Mumbai terrorist attacks unfold, the BJP's message was reinforced. MP Congress leader L.S. Hardenia said "the attack was the topic of conversation at every polling place." Before the elections, Hardenia was hopeful of Congress emerging as the coalition leader, but since the terrorist attacks on Mumbai, that possibility seems more remote, Hardenia said.

BJP Out-Campaigns the Congress

¶4. (SBU) For the Congress, the terrorist attacks in Mumbai are only one factor; the Congress was disadvantaged on several fronts during the campaign season. Facing a financial crunch, the party decided to concentrate campaigning on 155 "winnable" seats where its chances were best, foregoing aggressive campaigns in 75 districts where the BJP was certain to win. Interlocutors also agreed that compared to the BJP, the Congress' campaign was not as well organized or vibrant. The BJP and the media criticized the Congress' decision to not name a clear challenger to Chief Minister Chauhan. There were six Congress aspirants for the Chief Minister's job, which political observers said harmed the party's prospects.

¶5. (SBU) In contrast, the BJP capitalized on every opportunity, especially touting its development agenda. Most business interlocutors, as well as even some Congress rivals, concede that the incumbent Chief Minister has a good, pro-development image. According to observers, the BJP government showed significant progress in building road infrastructure during its tenure (though critics contend BJP has not done enough on other development fronts). Observers also say that the BJP has been able to claim credit for the moderately successful implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee

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program, which was launched by the UPA coalition. A Congress leader from the Malwa region conceded, "Though most of the conceptualizing and the money for these schemes came from the Congress-led UPA government, the voter good-will will accrue to the state government (BJP), because states implement these programs."

¶6. (U) Anil Dave BJP Secretary for MP was not at all confident, however, that BJP would sweep the elections. He indicated that as many as 50 of the 230 seats will be decided by margins narrower than 1000 votes because of the number of multi-party races on the ballot this year. According to Dave, the BJP's strengths going into the election were its better organization and its ability to control the message, leaving Congress always responding to BJP criticisms and unable to lead on any issue. In contrast to other interlocutors, Dave told Congenoffs that the terrorist attacks would only have a limited impact on the electoral results in MP.

Whatever Happens, Blame It on Anti-Incumbency

¶7. (SBU) Despite the BJP's strengths in the campaign, the BJP's Dave acknowledged that anti-incumbency was a significant factor in the elections. Interlocutors told Congenoffs that the BJP's campaign theme focusing on anti-terrorism and public safety is a double-edged sword for the ruling BJP party: that in most urban centers (traditional BJP bastions), voters blame the BJP for a rising crime rate, and poor leadership of the ineffective and corrupt police. Even the BJP's touted record on development was questioned by voters. The BJP claimed development was its prime accomplishment, but detractors of MP's incumbent BJP government pointed out that the state capital, Bhopal, gets potable water only once every two days, and rural areas have power-shortages of 13 hours or more. The turnover in leadership in MP -- three Chief Ministers since the BJP came to power in 2003 -- was also

seen as a weakness for the BJP. In an editorial in the Times of India discussing the MP elections, Swami Ayyar pointed out that almost all Indian states since the mid-nineties have been voting out incumbents, mainly because voters demand more progress on development issues than the crumbling state finances can deliver.

BJP's Anti-Anti-Incumbency Moves Help Third Parties

¶8. (U) Recognizing the threat of anti-incumbency sentiments, the BJP changed more than one-third of its incumbent MLAs, and dropped ministers who had serious corruption investigations underway against them. This tactic was used in the concurrent Chhattisgarh polls, and with much success in the December 2007 BJP victory in Gujarat. However, in a number of constituencies, erstwhile BJP candidates denied a BJP ticket in this election defected to other third parties, fractionalizing the BJP vote base and causing headaches for the BJP.

¶9. (U) The three parties that benefited from these moves the most were Uma Bharati's Bharatiya Jan Shakti Party (BJSP), Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP). Ousted former BJP Chief Minister Uma Bharati floated her own party, the BJSP, in March 2006 when she was thrown out of the BJP, and fielded candidates in over 200 seats. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati, who many believe has designs on national power in 2009, was also using MP as a testing ground for her national ambitions. As it did in Gujarat, the BSP fielded candidates in almost all constituencies, though the party is only competitive in a few races. The Samajwadi Party, loosely allied with UPA coalition since July 2008, fielded its own slate of candidates, contesting over 200 seats.

¶10. (U) Journalists and political observers noted that in nearly 100 out of the 230 seats, the contest was between four strong candidates -- BJP, Congress and two spoilers from either the BSP, BJSP, SP or a local tribal party, the Gondwana Ganatantra Party (GGP). The SP and the GGP were important in the state's northern Gwalior, Rewa, Bundelkhand regions bordering Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, while the BSP and BJSP were putting pressure on the Congress and the BJP respectively all over the state. The BSP, in particular, fielded nearly 66 high-caste candidates, disgruntled aspirants from both the Congress and the BJP. Known as a charismatic orator, Bharati drew large crowds for her rallies in Bhopal and other urban centers.

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¶11. (SBU) Though observers believe that anti-incumbency sentiment will influence voting, it may not help the Congress. MP Congress leader L.S. Hardenia predicts that enough of that anger at corruption and inept government would go to third parties, leaving Congress again in the position of runner-up in many seats. According to Hardenia, Mayawati's BSP party ran a strong campaign and he expects the BSP to win 10-15 seats. Uma Bharati's BJSP stood to win 10-15 seats also, according to Hardenia. While Hardenia did not see Bharati or Mayawati forming a coalition with BJP, he thought that either might authorize their candidates to negotiate independently to form a coalition government.

Voter Turnout Strong, BJP Credits Pro-Woman Programs

¶12. Dave told Congenoff that voter turnout was high, at close to 70 percent, with woman voting in equal percentages to men. (Note: Per MP's chief election officer, voter percentage in 2003 was 67.5 percent. End Note.) In rural areas, he said, voting was as high as 80 percent. Dave and other political observers have noted that that voter turnout above 62 percent usually signals the need of the people to voice their dissatisfaction with the incumbent government. Ever hopefully, Dave interprets the high turnout among women in this election as

signaling the success of the BJP's program targeted at women. (One program offers cash payments for the birth of girl children, educational benefits for girls to reduce their burden on parents, and promises cash payments when the girl turns 18 to help defray marriage costs.)

¶13. (SBU) Comment: The terrorist attacks on Mumbai will undoubtedly have an impact on voter sentiment in MP, but they will have been one of many issues on voter's minds on Election Day. Going into the elections, the BJP has a formidable lead, and can argue, convincingly, that it governed at least as well as previous Congress administrations. Nevertheless, anti-incumbency and new competition from third parties will make it difficult for both the Congress and BJP to gain seats, perhaps a preview to the national elections next year. Always eager and opportunistic for power, it is not clear how third parties might align themselves after the elections, and surprising combinations are possible. Polling results are due to be released on December 8. End Comment.
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